2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
EZ6 Malta EZ6

CHAPTER IV

The Basis of Leadership

The Maltese word for leader, *mexxej*, is seldom heard, and then only in reference to the leader of a political party. I once asked a parish priest who were the leaders of the village. He laughed and replied that there weren't any, because his parishioners did not like leaders. With the exception of the professionals and *il-puliti* from the towns, all the inhabitants of a village usually call one another by their Christian names and in general look upon each other as equals. This egalitarian outlook is compounded of many factors, of which the most important are similar occupation, standard of living and values, the detailed knowledge of each other's personal lives that comes with residence in a face-to-face community, and jealousy. Any person who attempts to lead or to try to start something new – such as a village playground – is derided. His true motive is seen as self aggrandizement and his enemies and envious neighbours are quick to point this out to others who may not have realized it. 'Envy follows the wise man like his shadow' (*L-ghira titrot wara l-gharef bhal dellu mieghu*), goes the Maltese proverb. Professionals and outsiders, especially if they are from the town, are occasionally able to start something new. Their social distance from most of the community protects them from the full impact of the envy and gossip which moulds so much of village life.

But in spite of the absence of official lay leaders and the conservative pressure of envy and gossip, there are a number of persons who have a greater say than others in the affairs of the community. They are able to do this by virtue of their social position, their occupation or office in one of the village associations or their influence with the parish priest. These persons, together with the parish priest, form the aggregate which can be said to run the affairs of the community. While there is no generic term for this aggregate, those who compose it are sometimes referred to as *il-kbarat*, 'the big ones', or more derogatively as

2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
EZ6 Malta EZ6

192 554 621 793

it-rjus il-kbar, 'the big heads'. But if asked, a person will often deny that such persons exist, and reply, 'Here we are all the same; we are all from the village'.

II

The authority of the State is represented by the police, who are formally responsible for law and order. Each village has a police station manned by a small contingent of constables under a sergeant. Several villages make up a police district under an inspector. In Malta most policemen live outside the villages in which they work. But it is usual for Gozitan constables stationed in Malta to be quartered in the police stations to which they are assigned.

In addition to their official duties of law enforcement, the police distribute voting certificates, help conduct censuses and give out the allotments of free food to old age pensioners and people on relief.[1] They also perform many favours for local residents. They help people fill out government forms, and occasionally allow the station telephone to be used for private calls. They are sometimes able to mediate in local disputes. Disputants very often report each other for insults, threats or some minor infraction of the law – throwing waste water and rubbish in the street is one of the most common – thus hoping to strangle their enemies in its due process. The police constable on duty is often able to reconcile the disputants and persuade them to withdraw the charges and counter-charges.

In general, the punitive role that the police are occasionally forced to play is offset by their role as distributors of government assistance and by their general helpfulness. District inspectors try to avoid personal relations with the people in their districts since they must prosecute all criminal cases, and personal ties might prove awkward. Sergeants and constables, on the other hand, normally maintain friendly social contact with the local inhabitants. They are often invited for drinks during feasts and weddings, and quite a number marry local girls. The Maltese police thus play

[1] The government has distributed surplus U.S. agricultural products to different groups of needy people since 1956. This food was first secured through the Co-operative for American Relief to Everywhere, Inc. (C.A.R.E., Inc.) and more recently through the Catholic Relief Services of America. The Department of Emigration, Labour and Social Welfare, not the police, selects the beneficiaries.

2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
EZ6 Malta EZ6

[p.74]

CHAPTER VI
Festa Partiti

578 621 Village unity is an ideal, and all villages try to present a tightly united front to the outside world. In spite of this, all are divided internally by cleavages which cut across the community at various levels. Some of these divisions are only temporary, and disappear when the issues out of which they have arisen are resolved. Others, which may have arisen out of temporary issues, have for one reason or another become a permanent part of the social scene. But regardless of their origin or duration, these divisions are painfully real to the villagers. Persons made vulnerable through a network of personal relations are often forced to commit themselves to a particular division. In doing so, they become opposed to neighbours and kinsmen who are committed to the other side. [602] This is one of the characteristics of life in all small villages. It is particularly true of communities, such as those in Malta, in which the inhabitants are closely related through kinship and affinity.

192 578 621 [665] [794] The Maltese call these divisions *partiti* (sing., *partit*). The term thus corresponds not only to groups of the order which we in English would call 'parties', but also to those to which we would apply the term 'factions'. Political parties are called partiti, and so are rival groups such as the two in Kortin which competed over the rebuilding of the church. Partiti are said to have *pika* between them. *Pika* denotes relations of competition, ill-feeling, hostility. There is little about the word which suggests the good-natured competition that can exist between rival school football or cricket teams. On the contrary, if there is *pika* between two groups, a no-holds-barred competition is expected. Partiti are thus considered to be a bad thing. They disrupt the harmony of the community and make it more difficult to project the ideal image of village unity to the outside world.

575 578 621 794 796 The oldest permanent division that exists in the villages is between the supporters of rival band clubs. This division is related to the cult of saints. In the previous chapter it was noted that

2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1963
EZ6 Malta EZ6

Malta. He sees the patronage system in Spain as a pyramidal structure incorporating both the natural and the spiritual worlds. At the top is God, the supreme patron who is not dependent upon anyone. At the base are the persons who have no clients. Between these lowly clients and God there are many different ranks of patrons, each of whom has his own small pyramid of clients. They, in turn, are clients dependent upon other higher and more influential persons. The patrons of each rank form a group which asks favours from one another on behalf of their clients.

The intermediaries between man and God are the saints, who are closer to God than man is. A person who seeks to influence the decision of a higher authority similarly looks for a person who, by virtue of his kin relation or social position, is closer to the decision maker than he. In view of the functional similarity of saints to living patrons, it should not come as a surprise that the word for patron in Maltese is 'saint' (*qaddis*; plural *qaddisin*). Several proverbs underline the important role that patrons play in Maltese social life. Here are two: 'Without saints you can't get to heaven' (*Minghajr qaddisin ma titlax il-ġenna*); and 'You can do nothing without saints' (*Minghajr qaddisin ma tagħmel xejn*). Another points to the fact that any patron-client relationship is not without obligation, even danger, for the client: 'He who fattens you will kill you' (*Min semmnek joqtlok*).

Who are these 'saints', these men of influence? For the most part they are people who have already been encountered, albeit in a slightly different capacity. They are the professionals, the civil servants and, in general, the wealthy and powerful. They are persons, respected for their education and social standing in the world outside the village, who can deal as equals with other important people and decision-makers, many of whom are their relatives and former classmates. Their patronage is sought by individuals and groups alike. They are often asked to become god-parents, and they are called on to handle the ceremonial, business and political relations of clubs. They are also called on to help secure employment, building permits, hawkers licences or a long-delayed hearing at the law courts. Generally speaking, villagers choose patrons from the circle of influential people with whom they have the closest contact: the local professionals, the parish priest and clergy, the important landlords, all of whom command respect outside the village. Some clients are related to their

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

796 on the morning of this day, was indeed very great.

When the procession was over, most of the country people repaired to the upper Barracca, which was then roofed over and consequently offered a very comfortable temporary asylum. Here they amused themselves till the evening eating, drinking, and singing.

St. PETER AND St. PAUL

796 529 One of the principal occasions of amusement for the Maltese is, no doubt, the popular feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, celebrated at Notabile or Città Vecchia on the 29th of June.

[192] This feast is known by the name of l' IMNARIA which is a corruption of *luminaria* (illumination) from the illumination which takes place at the

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

Cathedral Church of Notabile on the eve of the said festival.

On the morning of the feast—as soon as the procession, which is led by the Bishop, enters the Cathedral Church—large crowds, especially of country people in their substantial holiday finery, and wearing their hoarded ornaments of massive gold, drive at a racing speed to Boschetto, where, careless of the excessive heat of a broiling sun, they divide into companies and under the shades of the leafy orange trees in the beautiful garden, they seem quite happy in eating their sumptuous dinners, consisting chiefly of stewed rabbit, ham, pies, cheese and an allowance of common wine, which they keep in large dark glass bottles, or in tin cans where the indispensable liquid is less liable to being spilt.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

This yearly punishment is thought to have been inflicted, as our Saviour does not like any one to be born at the same time He was born!!

In order to give confirmation to this strange fancy, some of our silly females affirm that they frequently go in search of their husbands and children, and from midnight till about 4 a.m. they do not find them in the bed where they left them.

Others, who are still more superstitious, add to this foolish belief by saying that a person may get rid of this annual transformation by taking a sieve and spending from 11 o'clock at night till Christmas morning at dawn counting the holes.

We are unable to explain, goes on to say Vassalli, how this superstition got into the minds of our forefathers. We

7: Busuttil J, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

771 794 192 only know that the word "Gaugau" is derived from the Syrian word *hagogo* which means a ghost and most probably was introduced here by the Phoenicians.

BOGEY-MAN

776 The ancient Maltese thought, and insisted upon others believing, that the Bogey-man wanders about our streets during the winter nights.

The Bogey-man is described as a hideous animal partaking of the nature of an ox, a ram and a donkey, going about until it comes to the first house which has been unfairly possessed, in order that with its hideous cries it might frighten the inmates.

Parents and nurses are still in the habit of frightening the little ones with the Bogey-man in order to induce them to go to sleep.

5: Cremona B-3, 4 (no date) 1923
EZ6 Malta EZ6

The belief still lingers that the lamp must remain lighted for forty days, during which the soul of the departed remains above the flame.

(g) Some families give the poor bread. The love-feasts of the primitive Christians were in mediaeval times replaced in both Malta and Sicily by the distribution of cakes and of boiled wheat mixed with sesame. Distributions of meat and bread to the poor came also to be a custom at some *festas*, but were continued in Sicily mainly by the giving of beans and bread on All Souls' Day.[1] In Malta on that day, however, the old custom has been replaced by the free kitchens or the "Potage for the Poor" (*Borma tal-Fqûr*).

Mourning customs in Malta have during the last century passed through wide changes and, as in other European countries, have reverted to a more simple type. Some are purely mediaeval, and are influenced by the prolonged intercourse with Sicily and Italy during the rule of the Grand Masters. The vernacular term for mourning is *vistu*, corresponding to the Sicilian *visitusu* ("to be in mourning").

The wearing of special mourning clothes was general in the fourteenth century, but became less marked by the year 1700. Women used to wear woollen trailing skirts and dark shawls over their heads. Some better-class people wore one black transparent veil over the head and another veil of black silk taffeta over the gown, reaching to the waist. A sort of Majorca woollen cloth is prescribed for mourning wear to the heirs under a will of A.D. 1543. The Grand Master's suite wore a special garment called *Scoto*, of thin light serge. Although it is nowadays customary with some families to put on as little mourning as possible and to shorten its period, a full mourning dress is worn by others for two full years after the death of parents. The simplest style of mourning, a black necktie and a crape arm band, is in general use after the death of a distant relative.

Family mourning is generally observed as follows:—

I. Closure of business premises, a mourning notice being affixed to the door.

II. Women keep indoors for a few weeks, only going out in

[1] G. Pitrè, *Spettacoli e Feste Popolari*, vol. xii. p. 407.

5: Cremona B-3, 4 (no date) 1923
EZ6 Malta EZ6

Bombazine (without lace) or silk faldettas are now the popular style. The vernacular *fulqina* and *ghonnella* for the *faldetta* point to its probable origin; the word *ghonnella* is derived from the Italian *gonnella*. The term *falda*, with its diminutive *faldetta* (skirt), suggests that this hood or wimple represents the tail of the skirt put over the head inside out in wet weather. Black stone trinkets are worn in place of those of gold. Women in both villages and towns who cannot afford to buy special trinkets cover their earrings with black stuff.

The old funeral rites, described by Abela and Ciantar from extracts from wills of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, are only faint survivals of the gorgeous pseudo-pagan rites which prevailed in all parts of continental Europe up to the period of the Reformation, and in Malta when under Italian influence. Up to 1872 the burial of the dead generally took place in churches or in churchyards (Maltese *zmitier*, from French *cimetière*). This still continues in country places, where people have family vaults. A law providing for extra-mural interment was proposed by De Rohan (A.D. 1775-1797), but it was only enforced by the Police Law of 1869, when a public cemetery was provided in 1871.

Since the adoption of the new burial law, funeral customs have assumed a very simple character. Old custom required that the dead body should be placed on a handbarrow or in a coffin with a cushion stuffed with laurel and orange leaves fixed under the head. The body was then conveyed to the church, with the relatives and friends following, and the wailing of the mourners accompanied by the sound of bagpipes, which in some villages are now replaced by violins and counterbases to which lamentations are sung. Since the opening of the Addolorata Cemetery the dead are generally transported in hearses. The tolling of funeral bells was once so important that in many wills careful provision was made for it, and it even rivalled the usual charitable bequests. This corresponds to Sicilian custom in the fifteenth century. After burial of the corpse, a black carpet or coverlet, or a velvet counterpane, was laid over the grave, and left there for some days. The offering of flowers to the dead is at present in great favour amongst the less educated, but some of the higher class object to it as a pro-

fanation

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
EZ6 Malta EZ6

these transformed creatures return home towards dawn quite exhausted and awake in the morning quite unconscious of their nocturnal expedition."[1] The derivation of the word *Gaugau* has been given as the Syrian *Hagogo*, a ghost; but surely the *Gaugau* is more than a simple ghost. His behaviour stamps him as a vampire. Busuttil says that "the yearly punishment" is thought to be inflicted because Christ "does not like anyone to be born at the same time he was born," and then suggests that the *Gaugau* came into Malta with the Phoenicians. The Phoenician origin and the popular explanation seem quite irreconcilable until it is recalled that—

> "It is well known that in the transition from paganry to Christianity the Christian clergy, finding it impossible to wean the populace from old customs or to eradicate primitive beliefs, discreetly met the situation by diverting pagan festivals to the honour of Christ. It is not so generally known that December 25th, the Christmas Day of Christendom, was necessarily thus fixed for the reason that this date was the birthday of Mithra, and that the obdurate heathen flatly refused to relinquish their cherished festival. It was not until A.D. 400 that the Church Fathers accepted the inevitable, and tactfully adopted the Birthday of Mithra as the official Birthday of Christianity. At the beginning of the fifth century, S. Chrysostom, referring to the festival of the pagan Sun god, wrote: 'On this day also the birthday of Christ *was lately fixed* at Rome in order that, while the heathens were busy with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their sacred rites undisturbed. They call this (December 25th) the birthday of the Invincible One (Mithra); but who is so invincible as the Lord? They call

[1] BUSUTTIL, *Holiday Customs in Malta.*

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
EZ6 Malta EZ6

538 the Arab domination. Jahan is merely a typically Maltese character placed in a series of foreign settings which have been changed to give an appearance of authenticity.

THE PEASANT AND THE SULTAN

539 From the familiar ground of Jahan's adventures it is a long step to the tale of "The Kaukam and the Kaukama." Here, again, is the typical Maltese hero who, by superior cunning, outwits the "Sultan"[1] who sets him, a poor peasant, a series of impossible tasks, but the atmosphere of the story is of the distant past.

> "Upon a time there was a peasant who loved his father as the light of his eyes. When the father became very old and decrepid, the son was obliged to do as everyone else did; he had to put his father into a cave-tomb; but he could not bring himself to block up the mouth of the cave. . . . He kept two holes. . . ."

The son then arranges to feed his father by leading his ewes to the cave, so that the old man may suck their milk through one of the holes.[2]

539 888 It has been suggested that the burial of the aged father who is kept alive and his advice sought is nothing more than a tradition of oracular response from ancestral tombs. Although this is a reasonable enough theory, there seems no cause to doubt the possibility that the facts are exactly as stated. To this day primitive tribes get rid of their aged and infirm members, for obvious reasons. Respect for the wisdom and experience of the old men and women whose advice was sufficiently valuable

[192] [1] There is no Maltese word for "king," "ruler" or "governor." "Sultan" is used in folk-tales broadly to describe any person in authority. The Italian "re" is rarely used in the true vernacular.

[2] L. GALEA AND MARGARET A. MURRAY, *Maltese Folk Tales*.

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

197 seeing that they had no means of checking the facts for
648 themselves—what they wanted them to swallow. Even in the eighteenth century, as we shall see in Chapter XIII, an Italian visitor to Malta described the language of the Maltese as "their own perfidious idiom."

A case in point is the episode, recounted to the writer by one of His Majesty's Ambassadors to the Quirinal during the Fascist régime, concerning a Maltese football team on a visit to Italy. On their arrival in Rome the Maltese were met by the Italian team detailed to look after them, who had been well briefed to treat their visitors as 'unredeemed' blood-brothers. The Italians, knowing no reason to doubt the accuracy of their brief, greeted the Maltese footballers at the station in all good faith with a cordial address in eloquent Italian, of which their guests understood barely a word. Realizing, however, that they in their turn would be expected to say something, they replied with an equally friendly speech in Maltese, whereupon their hosts threw up their hands in mystified despair, crying, "*Ma che fratelli son' questi*—but what sort of brothers are these?"

197 A pleasant French contribution to Maltese is a word for
●192 a train, *xmundifer* (*chemin de fer*), thought to have been introduced by Maltese emigrants returning from Algeria and Tunis. And, as has been said above, English words, too, have found their way into Malta's eclectic vocabulary, words for the most part of a technical kind or related to sport. Among these is the verb "to score" which, as Professor J. Aquilina has pointed out, is conjugated as *niskorja*, I score, *skorja*, *skorjat*, *skorjajna*, *skorjaw*—he, she, we, they have scored a goal, and so on.

But it is interesting to note that we appear to be witnessing
[576] the beginnings of a two-way traffic in this connexion. The common Maltese form of greeting and farewell is *sahha*, literally "health," a word that springs easily and comfortably also to the lips of non-Maltese who have spent any time in the islands. Thanks, no doubt, to the habitual use of this

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

term by the numerous British Service men and women who have been stationed in or have passed through Malta, *sahha* has been admitted, in the form "sal a," into the more recent editions of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as an English word for "good-bye," with due acknowledgment of its Maltese origin. And perhaps "saha" is but the forerunner of others; for in its issue of the 5th January 1945 the London *Spectator* had this to say on the etymology of the word "spitchered," which occurs in one of the war books on Malta:

> The word clearly derives from the Maltese *spiċċa*, meaning "finished" or something similar. Naval opinion agrees with Air Force opinion on that. But naval opinion claims credit for embodying the word in the English language. And as naval opinion can point to its use as long ago as 1903, the Air Force does seem to be grounded or, indeed, spitchered on this particular point.

4

In some parts of the Old World the visitor can select, according to his tastes, the century that he prefers. It is no exaggeration to say that in Malta he can choose the millennium and more than the millennium. If he is a palæontologist he may wander about the cave of Ghar Dalam and study *in situ* the remains of the elephants and hippopotami who left their bones there when the world was yet young, and of giant swans who sailed on lakes that have long since vanished. Advancing from these and from the Neanderthal Man, of whom traces may have been found in Malta, many thousands of years into the Stone Age, he will find in Malta and Gozo a series of megalithic and neolithic sanctuaries—Tarxien, the Hypogeum at Hal Saflieni, Ħaġiar Qim, Mnajdra, Ġgantija, to mention only the most important—unequalled in any other part of the world.

He will find other survivals of the Stone Age, of a different sort, in the cart-tracks which traverse many of the barren